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The Vale and Ridgeway Project: Excavations at Marcham/Frilford 2010: interim report

Introduction to the Vale and Ridgeway Project

The background to the project and site has been detailed in the previous nine interim reports in *South Midlands Archaeology* (Lock and Gosden 2002; Lock and Gosden 2003; Lock et. al. 2004; Gosden and Lock 2005; Lock and Gosden 2006; Kamash et al. 2007; Kamash et al. 2008; Kamash et al. 2009; Kamash et al. 2010a and 2010b), as well as on the project web site:

<http://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/VRP1.html>

As in previous years the excavation acts as a training excavation, and is committed to education in the widest sense. This season's excavation, our tenth overall, saw participants from across the world including the USA and Norway as well as from a selection of British schools and universities. Education Officers were on-site throughout the month of excavation and gave tours to many visitors including groups from local schools and community organizations. Various activities were organized for National Archaeology Day when over 1000 people visited the site.

The 2010 Excavation Season [Figs 1 and 2]

Excavations this year were focussed on Trendles Field, in two different areas: the area of the Roman religious complex (MF) and an area of predominantly Iron Age activity (MFP). In MF, trench 40 was continued from the previous season and trench 21, which had been investigated in 2004, and 2006 to 2008 was extended to the north. The aim of these trenches was to investigate activity towards the end of the drain leaving the semi-amphitheatre in trench 40 and to the north-east in trench 21.

In MFP, trench 1, which had been subject to flooding in 2007, was reopened, trench 2 was continued from the previous season, and two new trenches, 3 and 4, were opened further to the east. All of these trenches were located on interesting geophysical anomalies visible in William Wintle's survey [Fig. 2]. Trenches 1, 2 and 3 targeted two sets of rectilinear and curvilinear enclosures in order to develop a deeper understanding of the function and chronology of these features. Trench 4 was placed in an area that seemed to have a very high density of pits to the north of these two sets of enclosures, so that we could investigate the relationship between this cluster of pits and the enclosures.

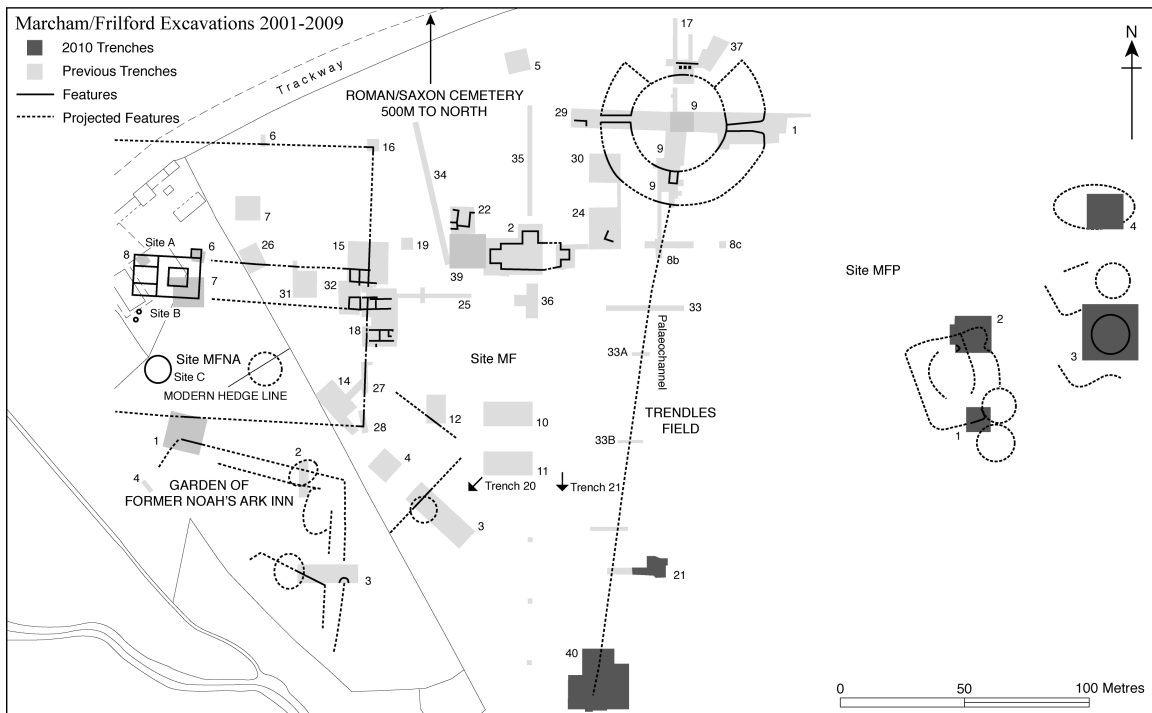


Fig. 1: Overall plan of the site showing the different excavation areas and the trenches excavated in 2010.



Fig. 2: Geophysical survey (undertaken by William Wintle) of the MFP excavation area.

Excavations in the religious complex (MF10): Trenches 40 and 21

MF10 Trench 40

Excavations continued in trench 40, c. 25 m x 25 m, in the area of the putative end of the drain. The final destination of the drain [40,007] continues to evade our detection, but is definitely still stone built into the centre of trench 40. One possibility is that the drain peters out, which would explain why it is so difficult to find. In spite of this, the continued excavation of the ponding deposit (40,058) has proven fruitful. It is hoped that further, detailed analysis of the finds from this deposit may help considerably in elucidating some of the practices and activities that were occurring at this site.

MF10 Trench 21

In 2004, excavations in this area revealed a well or large pit [21,010] that had excellent waterlogged preservation at the eastern end of the trench [Fig. 3]. The limited excavations in that season yielded a leather shoe and a nearly complete pottery vessel. In this season, a larger area was opened at this eastern end to reveal fully the extent of this feature and ascertain if it was related to any nearby structures (the depth of topsoil and overburden in this area of Trendles Field does not allow for clear results in geophysical survey).

MF 10

Trench 21

Section 21.016

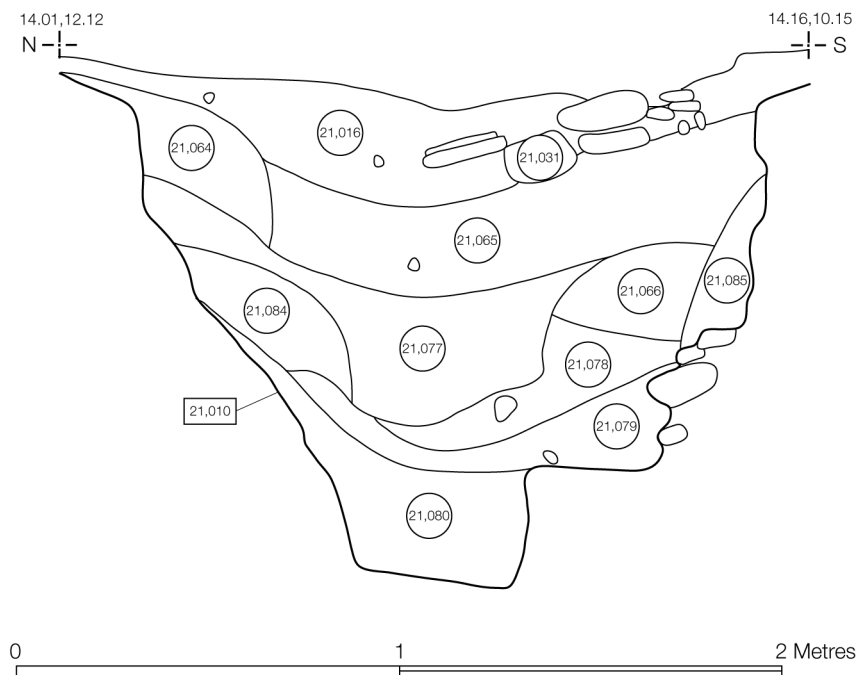


Fig. 3: Section through well/pit [21,010] in MF trench 21.

The large pit or well was c. 1.6 m in diameter and c. 1.3 m deep. Due to the excellent preservation conditions, several important finds were retrieved from the well, including c.

one quarter of a wooden writing tablet and a wicker basket. The writing tablet was retrieved from the same fill (21078=21026) as the leather shoe and pottery vessel found in 2004; a bird skull and a cattle skull were also found in this fill. Other finds of wooden writing tablets tend to be confined to military sites in Britain, so this find is quite exceptional and adds a different dimension to our knowledge of the site and the people using it. A second pottery vessel with a hole punched into its side was also recovered from the primary fill (21080=21030).

To the north of this feature ran a c. 7 m portion of a shallow curvilinear ditch [21,070], of interest as it is possibly associated with a roundhouse. The ditch was c. 1 m wide and only 0.1 m deep.

Excavations in the Iron Age enclosures (MFP10): Trenches 1-4

MFP10 Trench 1 [Figs 4-6]

Trench 1 was originally opened in 2007, but after a single week of work the trench flooded after the River Ock broke its banks and no further work could be conducted for the remainder of the season (Kamash et al. 2007). The dry conditions during summer 2010 allowed excavations to resume. The focus of the excavation was to explore the relationship between the enclosure ditches and pits that were identified on the geophysical survey [Fig. 2].

Ditch Group [1001] was the western terminus of the northern circular enclosure ditch. Ditch cut [1002], c. 0.88 m wide x c. 0.30 m deep, was filled with a single fill (1003). The ditch was cut into the reddish subsoil (1044) that covered nearly the entire trench. The ditch fill had a very high charcoal content, along with a relatively large number of burnt animal bones. The fill also contained fragments of large animal bones, including horse. The ditch is much narrower and shallower than the other enclosure ditches in the trench, [1010], [1013] and [1038]. Presumably, this is due to the fact that the portion of the ditch excavated is a terminus, rather than the main portion of the ditch. Curvilinear ditch [1038] lay to the south of the circular enclosure ditch group [1001]. In 2007, a complete badger skull was recovered from the ditch fill (1039). The ditch, which was c. 2.0 m wide at top and c. 0.7 m deep does appear to have a broader, flat base (c. 0.6 m wide) when compared to the rectangular enclosure ditches, groups [1010] and [1013] [Fig. 5].

The southern-side ditch of the rectangular enclosure, group [1010], ran through the centre of the trench. The ditch cut [1061] was a v-shaped ditch c. 1.5 m wide at top and c. 0.1 m wide at the base; it was c. 0.85 m deep. [Fig. 6]. The ditch was similar in shape to that found in ditch group [1013] (see below), which is the eastern turn of the rectangular enclosure ditch; however, the southern turn of the ditch was not nearly as deep (less than 1 m). A linear feature [1036] cut the fill (1062) of ditch [1061]. This shallow and ill-defined feature contained both limestone blocks and a few examples of modern brick, probably of 19th-century date. This may have served as a modern agricultural land drain, although the line of stones stopped abruptly at the western bulk of the trench and was not laid out in a fashion to maximize drainage down to the River Ock. A further explanation

is that the line of stones and modern brick might represent material dragged into this linear alignment at some point by a farm plough.

MFP 10

Trench 1

Plan 121

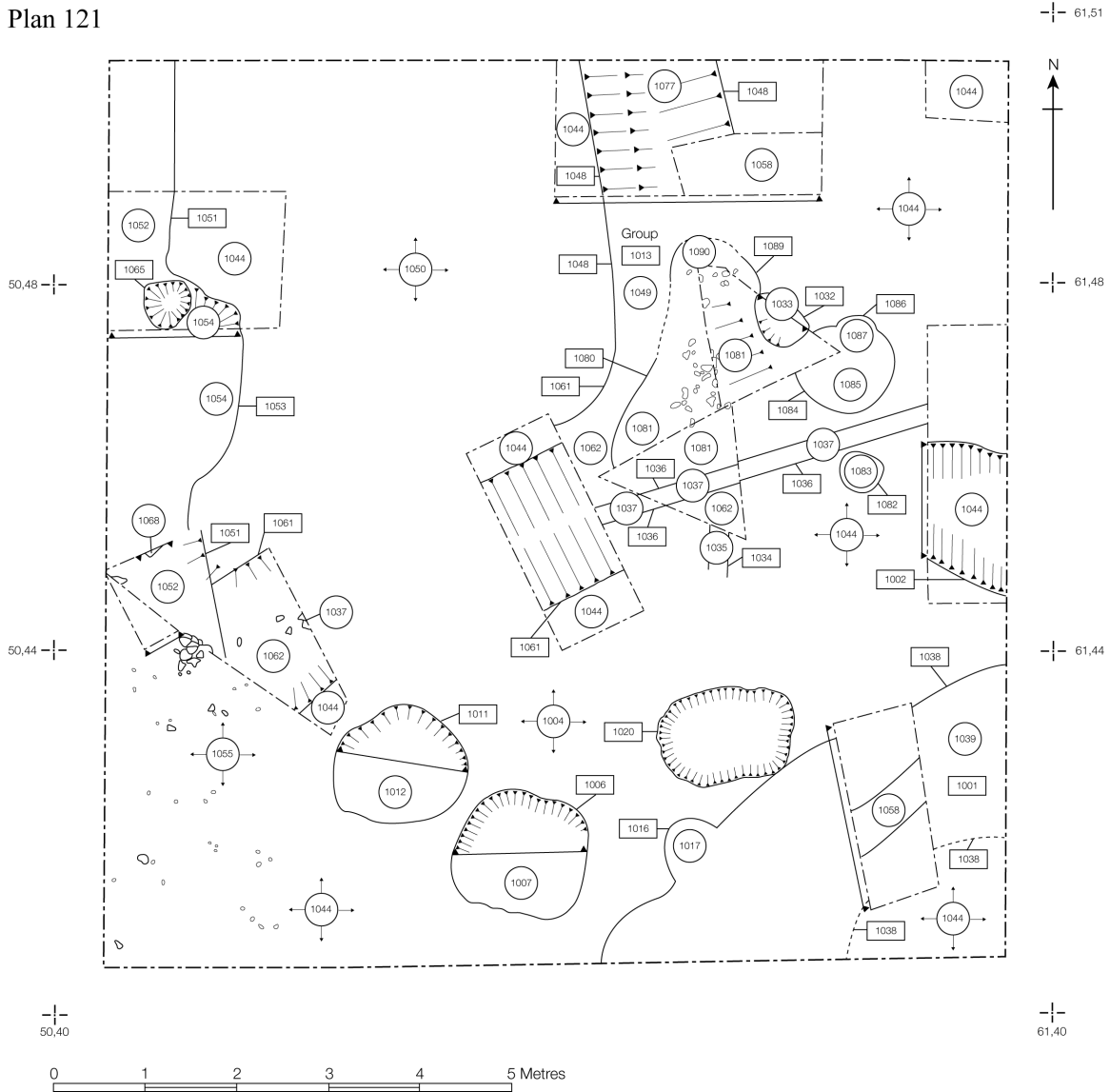


Fig. 4: Plan of MFP trench 1.

The eastern ditch, group [1013], of the rectangular enclosure that was evident on the geophysical survey ran into the northern baulk. Ditch cut [1048] had three separate fills: (1060 – primary), (1063 – secondary) and (1049 – tertiary). The ditch was c. 2.1 m wide at the top and c. 1.1 m deep. The shape of the ditch was similar to that found in ditch group [1010]. The phasing of the different enclosures remains unclear as no direct stratigraphic relationship could be established, but can maybe be established on the basis of pottery evidence.

MFP 10
Trench 1
Section 1.02

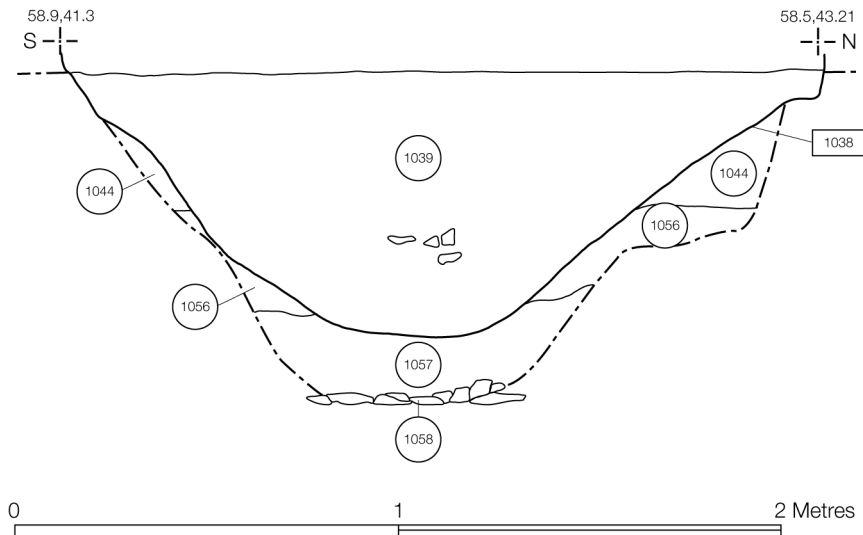


Fig. 5: Section through ditch [1038] in MFP trench 1.

MFP 10
Trench 1
Section 1.11

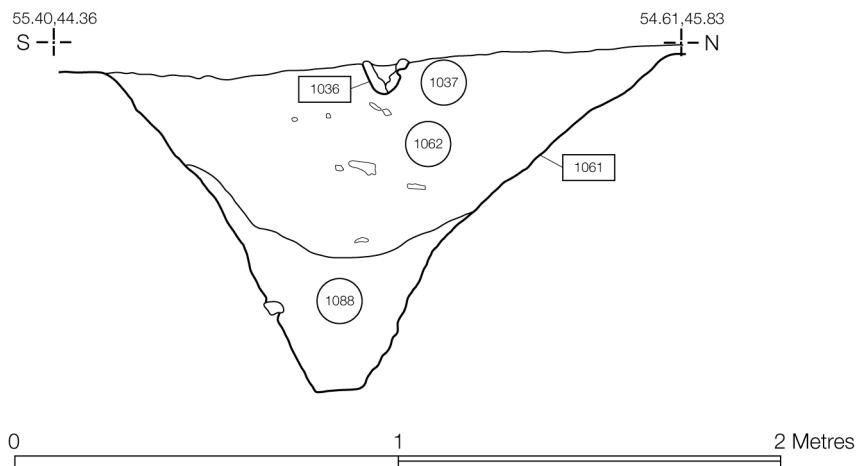


Fig. 6: Section through ditch [1061] in MFP trench 1.

A series of pits, [1032], [1080] and [1089], were located at the corner of the rectangular enclosure where groups [1010] and [1013] intersected. Small pit [1032] was cut into group [1013]. Its fill (1032) contained Iron Age pottery and animal bone fragments. Pit [1080] was much larger in plan (c. 1 m in diameter) and was probably also later than

groups [101] and [1013]. Large sherds from a single large vessel were retrieved from this pit, but unfortunately, due to lack of time, this pit was not fully excavated.

Finally, a group of three discrete pits were located in the southern central area of the trench: [1020], [1006] and [1011]. Pits [1020] and [1006], which were excavated in 2007, were very shallow and only c. 0.2 m deep. Pit [1011] was the only pit in the trench that is visible on the geophysical survey. This pit was half-sectioned and was found to have undercut sides to form a slightly bell-shaped cut. This pit, which was bell-shaped and c 0.8 m deep, was significantly larger than the other two pits. It contained a single fill (1012) that yielded Iron Age pottery.

MFP10 Trench 2 [Fig. 7]

Trench 2 is located on sloping ground with high land to the north east and low land to the south and south west. The bedrock drops almost vertically from 98.06 m OD to 96.04 m OD, at which depth it is overlain by a thick natural layer of glauconite-rich green sand that is in turn overlain by tufaceous white clay.

Excavations at this level revealed shallow sub-circular cuts into the white clay, particularly [2205] from which spread a lens of dark, charcoal-rich silt and waste material (2178), containing Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age transition pottery recovered in MFP09. Similar deposits were subsequently found to extend non-continuously at an almost uniform average depth of 97.00 m OD across the south side of the trench and to have been sealed by substantial deposits of tufaceous and colluvial clays, occasionally interspersed with further dark lenses and bioturbation. Over time, the gradient of these deposits increased, developing a slope silted from the north side. Environmental sampling has shown the tufaceous and colluvial deposits to be sterile.

At the centre of the trench, cut into the tufaceous clays to a depth of 96.51 m OD, are two parallel curvilinear features, [2385] and [2386]. It is possible that these were drainage channels, as the primary fills of both are consistent with waterborne silt deposition and excavation in wet weather proved their effectiveness for this purpose. However, both channels are cut through a thin band of green sand at an approximate depth of 96.67 m OD, which was weathered during excavation to create a distinctive profile absent from the original section. This suggests that their use may have been necessarily brief. The relationship between these features and the Bronze Age enclosure ditch excavated in MFP09 is uncertain due to the intrusion of later features and can only be said to be broadly contemporaneous.

Throughout the Iron Age, a series of intercutting pits were cut into the tufaceous and colluvial clays. It is possible that their purpose was the quarrying of these deposits, but they were also used for deposition of waste and a single neonatal burial (2140). Many of the pits were contemporary, leaving a large hollow of partially silted features. It was at this time that the Bronze Age D-shaped enclosure was remodelled, with the original ditch re-cut by a v-shaped Iron Age ditch, group [2380], curving sharply south, which was itself re-cut twice. This and another ditch aligned north-west/south-east, group [2379],

(2377) between [2380] and pit group [2012], and which appeared largely comprised of colluvial silts; and group (2376) that levelled the [2012] pits. The majority of clustered deposits appeared to be within (2378), but concentrations of oyster shell and metal slag were also found elsewhere.

Central within (2376) and over [2012] lay (2381), the largest of three tabular limestone rocks, the others being in (2378), lifted in MFP09, and in the top of what is now known to be an isolated Iron Age pit, [2004], and which was lifted in MFP08. Stone (2381) is 1.5 x 0.9 x 0.3 m, with rough circular holes throughout. Some of these holes pierced the entire breadth of the stone, but there was no evidence of their being other than natural was observed. No distinctive deposits were identified beneath the stone. In addition, it was found to be possible for the stone to stand unsupported on one edge. It seems likely that the holes imbued this stone with an indeterminate significance that warranted its deposition in the midden, possibly as part of a closing event whereby focus shifted toward the religious complex. It is also probable that the holes aided its transportation to that location as the stone itself is of a very great weight. The other stones, none of which were found to have holes, may have inherited significance by association.

The final phase of activity was the cutting of three sub-circular Roman pits of unknown function with vertical sides and flat bases, through the midden layer (2376). Another potential example remains unexcavated, and cuts the Iron Age ditch [2380]. This shows that although the major focus moved towards the west, activity in this area continued longer than previously supposed.

MFP10 Trench 3 [Figs 8-9]

Trench 3 was located over a large curvilinear anomaly visible in the geophysical survey [Fig. 2] to elucidate its purpose and its relationship with the nearby enclosures. In 2010, the principal aim of trench 3 was to investigate this curvilinear ditch [3011] and some of its associated features. All the features excavated cut through a yellowish-red layer (3035) that spread throughout the trench. It appears to have been hill wash from the area of trench 4 and provided the trench with a very different landscape to trenches 1, 2, and especially 4. Excavation in the south-east corner suggests that there might be archaeology underneath this layer.

Ditch [3011] was approximately 18 m in diameter, c. 2 m wide and 1.10 m deep, with a v-shaped profile, into which several interventions were made. On the eastern side ditch there was an entrance, aligned to the south-east; here the termini of the ditch were distinctive as they were cut square, in both plan and profile [3119 and 3084] [Fig. 9]. In the upper fills of the ditch a large amount of metalwork was uncovered including brooches and rings of early Roman date. In the lower fills, there was a discrepancy in finds between the northern and southern sides of the ditch; on the southern side and at the ditch termini a number of finds clusters consisting of a large amount of animal bones and some Iron Age pot sherds were found, this in contrast to the northern side which produced no such evidence. The clustering of finds suggests that this discrepancy is not due to erosion and hill wash, but rather was a set of deliberate acts of deposition in the

southern part of the ditch. Inside the ditch a number of pits, gullies and postholes were identified and excavated. They were all shallow with limited finds.

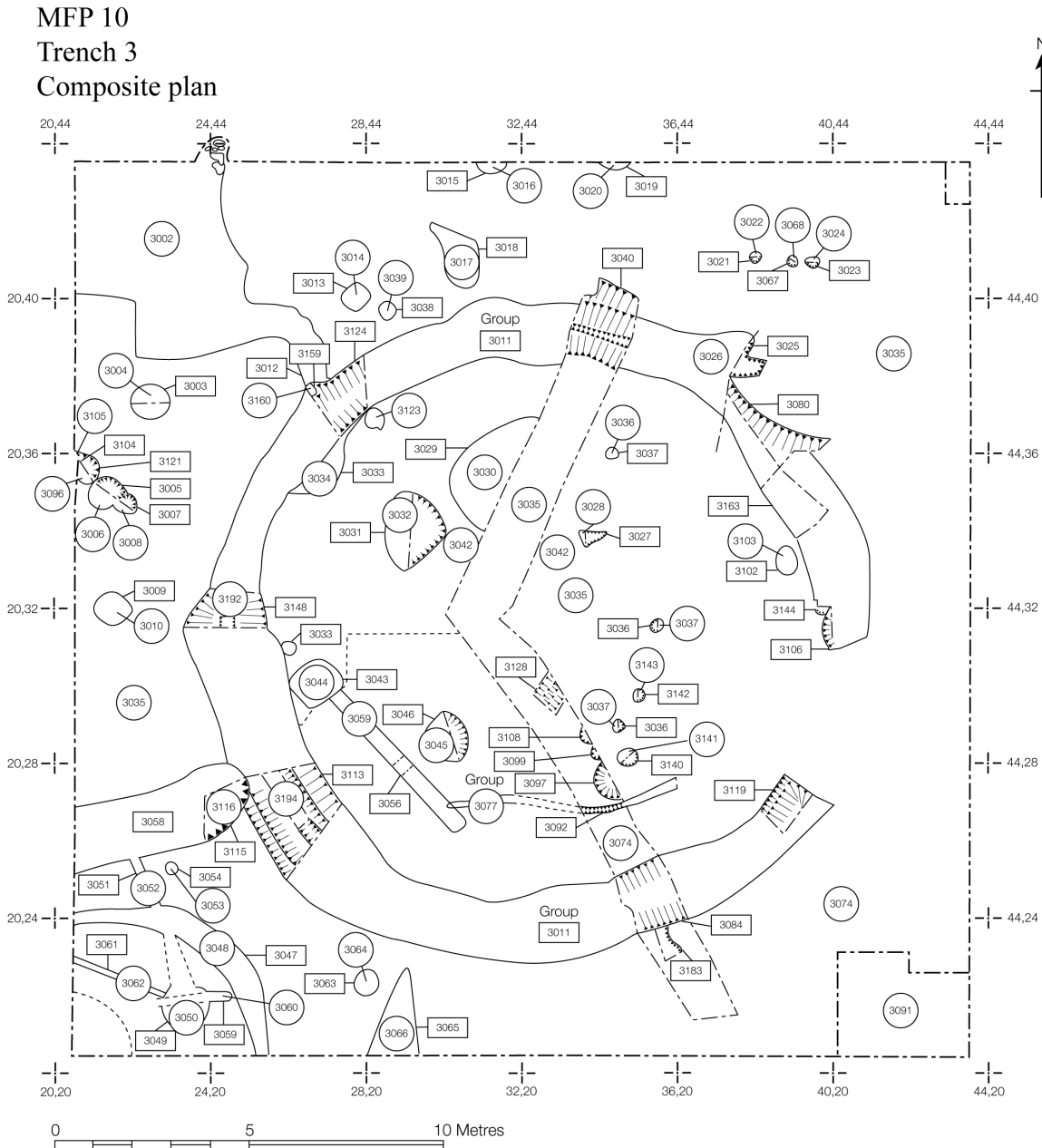


Fig. 8: Plan of MFP trench 3.

The function of the curvilinear enclosure is not clear, but it does not appear to be straightforwardly domestic. It is too large to be a roundhouse. Although an arc of postholes was found towards the eastern entrance to the enclosure, there do not seem to be sufficient numbers of these for a house structure. The contrast in finds between the northern and southern parts of ditch [3011] and between the ditch and the pits inside the enclosure is also hard to explain. It is unusual to find a ditch that is more finds rich than

its associated pits, which either suggests that these features are of different dates or were subject to very different depositional practices, as was suggested for the different sides of the ditch itself. The presence of metalwork in the top fills of the ditch suggests that the enclosure still held some importance into the early Roman period. Further analysis of the finds and their patterning may help us to unravel the function of this enclosure.

Outside the ditch, pits in the northern and western sides of the trench were excavated; they were also shallow with limited finds. Also identified was a second ditch in the north-western corner [3002] and a series of pits and gullies in the south-western corner [3047, 3049, 3059, 3061]. These will be investigated further, along with the curvilinear ditch, next season.

MFP 10

Trench 3

Sections 3.36 & 3.37

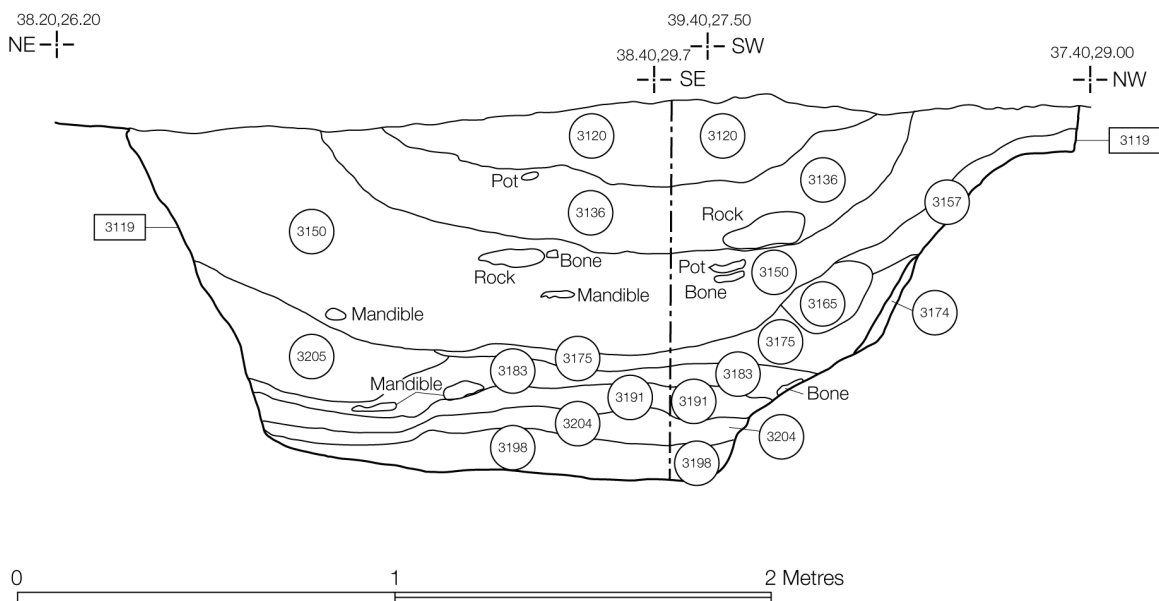


Fig. 9: Composite section of ditch terminus [3119] in MFP trench 3.

MFP10 Trench 4 [Figs 10-12]

Trench 4 was located over a distinctive cluster of pits visible on the geophysics. This cluster, the northern extent of which is obscured on the geophysics by interference from an electricity pylon, appears to be very tightly bounded, but there is no ditch or other form of physical boundary visible in the survey. This lack of physical boundary was confirmed by the excavations.

The trench contained c. 40 inter-cutting and discrete pits cut through the bedrock, which was only c. 0.1-0.2 m beneath the top surface. The lack of the reddish brown soil covering the bedrock that is characteristic of the majority of the rest of the site is notable here. This is particularly striking given the depth at which the bedrock lies in trenches 2

and presumably 3. This implies, firstly, that the ground may have dropped off more dramatically in the past than the current topography would suggest and, secondly, that there has been significant erosion in this area. The second suggestion is confirmed by the shallowness of the pits, many of which were less than 0.5 m deep [Fig. 11]. Some of the finds in the eastern part of trench 3 almost certainly derive from the area in and around trench 4. Despite the heavy truncation that these pits have suffered, some significant finds were still made. The most noteworthy of these was the burial of a juvenile [SK 21] in pit [4078] to the north of the trench [Fig. 12]. The shallow oval pit was c. 1.3 m long x c. 1.0 m wide. As well as this burial, there were also several finds of well-preserved and in some cases articulated animal bone. In addition to the pits, a shallow curvilinear gully [4042] also ran through the south-eastern corner of the trench.

MFP 10
Trench 4
Plan 400

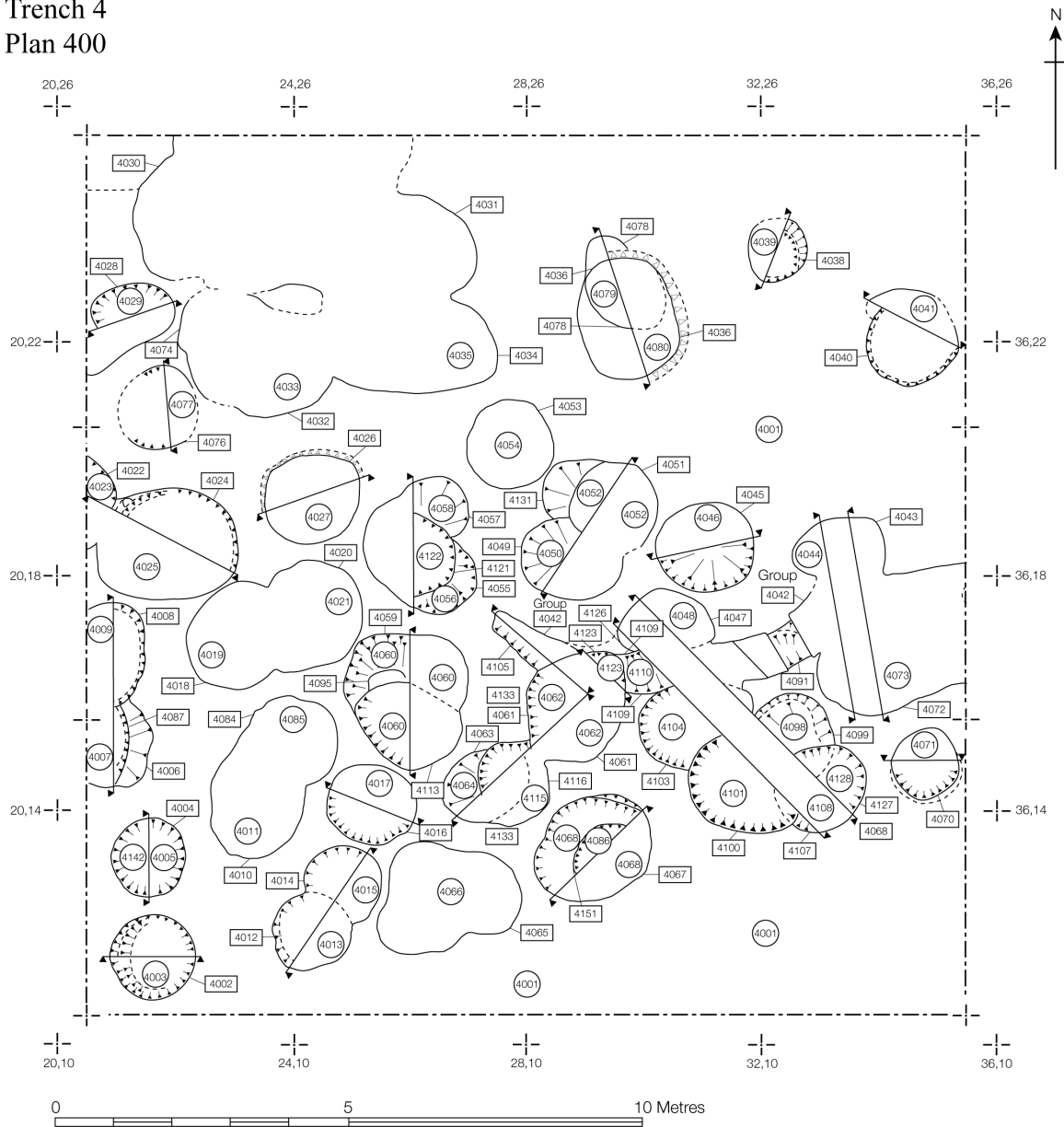


Fig. 10: Plan of MFP trench 4.

MFP 10
Trench 4
Section 4.14

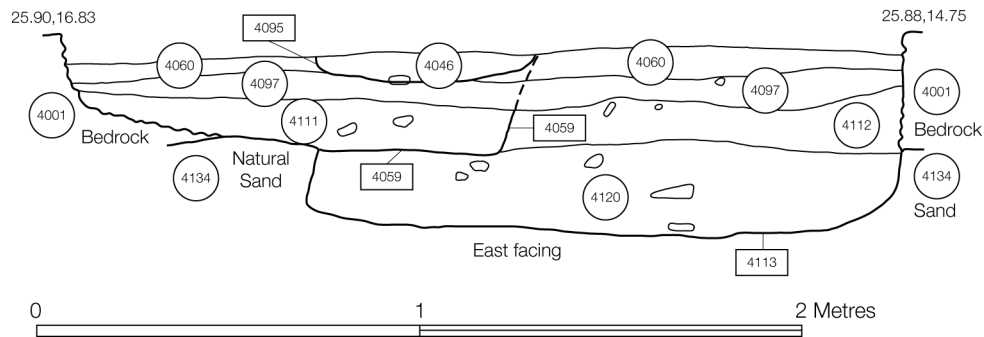


Fig. 11: Section through pits [4095], [4059] and [4113] in MFP trench 4.

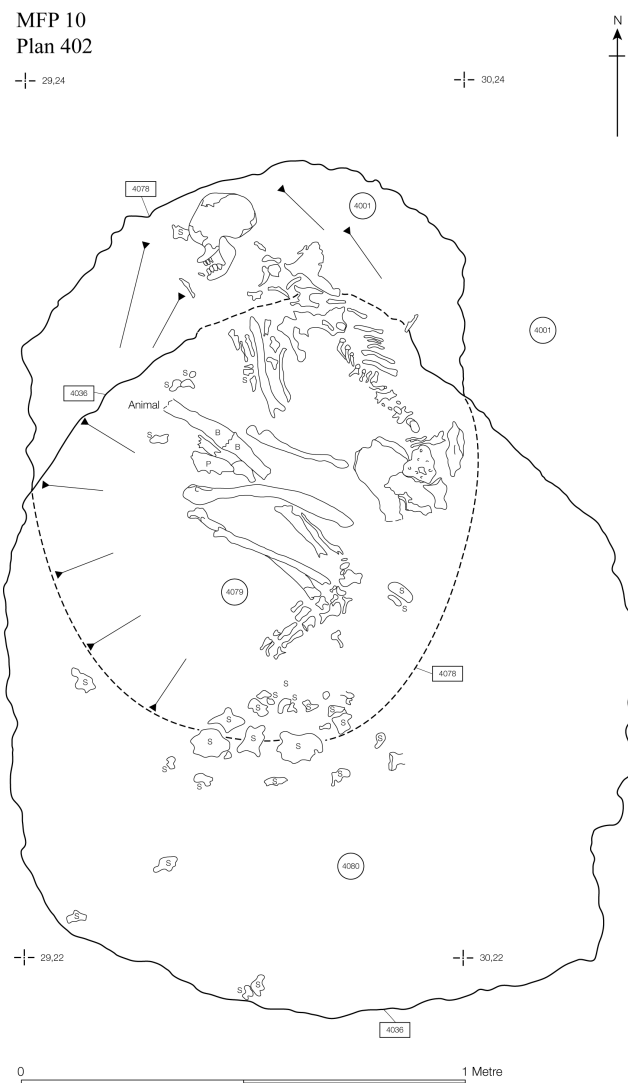


Fig. 12: Plan of SK 21 in pit [4078] in MFP trench 4.

Conclusions and future plans

The excavations in southern part of the Roman religious complex continue to contribute to our understanding of some of the activities at this site. As has been mentioned in previous interim reports, these activities seem to fit into well-known, long-term patterns of practice involving wet and boggy places in Roman and pre-Roman Britain (see e.g. Fulford 2001). The find of a partial wooden writing tablet in the large pit or well in trench 21 also suggests that at least some of the people who attended this complex were literate, upper class and engaging in Roman ways of living in Britain.

Further to the east the Iron Age enclosures and the cluster of pits are adding to our knowledge of what happened on this site before the Roman period religious complex came into being. While the exact nature of this activity is still unclear, the nature of the material culture found in this area and some of the ways in which it has been deposited suggest that this activity was not straightforwardly domestic. Given the apparent scale of activity across this site in the Iron Age, both here and further to the west in the scheduled area (Kamash et al. 2009 and 2010b), this does beg the question of where the people doing these things and creating these enclosures were living.

It is anticipated that 2011 will be our final season of excavations at this site. A key unanswered question for the religious complex area, which we hope to resolve this summer, is the final destination of the drain leaving the semi-amphitheatre. The remainder of our effort will be focussed on the Iron Age enclosures to the east of the religious complex. Excavations will continue in trenches 3 and 4 to further elucidate their function and chronological relationships. Given the curious variability of the geology in this area, which appears to have a strong effect on the nature of the archaeology, we intend to open a further trench to link trenches 3 and 4. This trench will also investigate another of the large circular enclosures, which may also help to shed some light on their function. Another trench will also be located to the north-east of trench 4 in the area of enclosure complex. It is hoped that these trenches, in addition to those we have already excavated in this area, will provide us with valuable insights into the Iron Age activity in this field and possibly suggest some reasons as to why it became such a large religious focus in the Roman period.

Acknowledgements

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